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TAGS: PGOV PREL ECON BL
SUBJECT: CODEL REID VISIT TO LA PAZ, BOLIVIA

Classified By: Ambassador Philip S. Goldberg for reason 1.4(a).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On December 27) 29, Senator Harry Reid led a six-member delegation including Senators Durbin, Conrad, Gregg, Bennett, and Salazar to La Paz, Bolivia to meet with President Evo Morales and review US assistance and counter-narcotics policies. The delegation was briefed by Ambassador Goldberg, met with USAID Director Yates, and heard USAID beneficiaries' perspectives on U.S. assistance in Bolivia. The delegation had an open discussion with President Morales, Vice President Garcia Linera, Foreign Minister Choquehuanca, and Minister of the Presidency Quintana on GOB coca policies, attitudes towards democracy, and views of the United States. Finally, Senators and staffers met with two former Bolivian presidents, the leader of the opposition, several recent hunger-strikers, and other influential Bolivians at a dinner which offered them a wide spectrum of views of the Bolivian political situation. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

¶2. (U) On December 27) 29, Senator Harry Reid (Nevada) led a bi-partisan six-member delegation including Senators Durbin (Illinois), Conrad (North Dakota), Gregg (New Hampshire), Bennett (Utah), and Salazar (Colorado) to La Paz, Bolivia to meet with President Morales and review US assistance and counter-narcotics policies. Senator Reid was met by press upon his arrival at his hotel in La Paz and underscored that he had come to Bolivia to express U.S. interest in improved relations with Bolivia and to meet with the president.

REVIEWING US ASSISTANCE

¶3. (U) The delegation was briefed by Ambassador Goldberg, met with USAID Director Yates, and heard USAID beneficiaries' perspectives on U.S. assistance in Bolivia. USAID held a

project fair which highlighted the USG's development assistance investments aimed at reducing poverty; encouraging inclusion of indigenous peoples and building the capacities of the Bolivian people to better manage their own development. A key theme was providing opportunities (not hand-outs) for a better life for people in some of the most conflictive parts of the country (e.g., El Alto, the coca-growing regions), in particular through exports of high-quality agricultural products, handicrafts, and textiles (including woven alpaca goods supported by the Peace Corps). The fair allowed the Senators to interact directly with the beneficiaries of this assistance to better understand how these efforts are improving their lives. Display tables also highlighted the USG's support for Bolivian democracy, including a strong and independent judiciary; free and fair elections; and expanding access to justice for the poor. Finally, the Senators were able to taste the fruits of the USG's alternative development programs with samples of a range of agricultural products, from banana, pineapple and hearts of palm (successful licit crops enjoying very strong and growing export markets) to quinoa (a high-protein Andean grain), specialty coffee and chili peppers. Press coverage was excellent, including a live TV feed during which Senator Salazar offered remarks in fluent Spanish.

MEETING WITH PRESIDENT MORALES

¶4. (C) Senator Reid led a frank discussion with President Morales on his coca policies, attitudes towards democracy, and views of the United States. Senator Reid opened by noting that the United States and Bolivia have a long history of friendly relations. The Senator added that he had chosen to make the Andean region his first official stop before becoming Senate Majority Leader in order to underscore the importance of friendly ties with this region) and with Bolivia) to the United States. In an allusion to Bolivia's recent political turmoil, the Senator reviewed recent political history in the United States and noted that even in the most controversial elections, the American people accept the outcome of the voting and don't take to the streets to achieve political objectives. Senator Reid noted that President Morales had clearly received a democratic mandate from his people to govern) and encouraged him to use this mandate to the benefit of all Bolivians. The Senator noted that in his view the six-month extension of ATPDEA should have been for a longer period and pledged support for a further extension down the road.

¶5. (C) President Morales replied with an expression of gratitude to President Bush for ATPDEA extension, and thanked the Senator for his visit. Morales underlined strong GOB interest in pursuing access to the Millennium Challenge Account (MCC), noting that the GOB's principal priority was road-building to the north of the country. Morales noted that given Bolivia's many development challenges, it is compelled to seek assistance and partners wherever it can find them. As President Morales launched into a defense of his coca policy, Senator Reid cut him short, noting that he was not here to debate the specifics, but rather to underscore that cocaine is unquestionably bad, and that President Morales has a mandate, and the ability, to reduce the amount of coca in Bolivia; it was his responsibility to the international community to do this.

¶6. (C) Responding to Senator Durbin's probing on his relationships with President Chavez of Venezuela and Cuba's Castro, President Morales responded that Bolivia will seek development partners wherever it can find them. Venezuela offered assistance in a variety of areas, including valuable technical expertise in the hydrocarbons area, where Bolivia is sorely deficient. President Morales said that Cuba offered valuable free medical care to the poorest Bolivians. This is assistance that Bolivia couldn't do without. &We search everywhere for partners; we don't need bosses,⁸ he said to close his response. Senator Reid responded that the U.S. sought greater recognition for the health and other

programs that we fund.

¶7. (C) Senator Conrad probed President Morales on his public attacks against the United States, noting that a good relationship would be impossible if it is continually framed by attacks against the United States. Conrad noted that there is no U.S. conspiracy against President Morales and his administration. Conrad emphasized the desire of the American people to partner with Bolivia to address its many challenges, as we are already doing. The Senator noted that the bilateral relationship should be built upon expressions & of mutual respect⁸. President Morales replied with a list of complaints which he said demonstrated the hostility of the United States Government, including a bombing of a Bolivian hotel by (a mentally unbalanced) American citizen last year, the absence of a previous American Ambassador from a reception he had hosted, the vice president's presence on the no-fly list, the fact that as president he is only entitled to single-entry visas, and a recent incident in which American tourists had photographed his car.

¶8. (C) Senator Bennett jumped in at this point, noting that his own wife had repeatedly been denied boarding as a potential terrorist despite his Senate identification card. Senator Reid noted that Senator Kennedy had even been denied boarding. Looking at the vice president and the minister of the presidency, and noting that he had already discussed every single incident with them, the Ambassador responded, point-by-point, to the president's complaints, closing by noting that & Mr. President, at some point you're just going to have to trust us.⁸ The Ambassador also alluded to the fact that President Morales is the victim of bad intelligence from his advisors and other countries. Neither the president nor vice president responded.

¶9. (C) Finally, in Spanish, Senator Salazar told President Morales that he came with two important messages: the fate of countries like Bolivia, our hemispheric neighbors, was important to the United States and we want to work to resolve mutual challenges. Secondly, it was clear that & we need to communicate better.⁸ There is sympathy in the United States for President Morales, goals of social inclusion and fighting poverty. The Senator implied that it was up to the president to try to improve communication.

¶10. (C) The president closed the meeting by offering his thanks once again for the visit of the Senators, and noting that he hoped to visit Washington to continue the dialogue. Senator Reid noted that he would do what he could to make that happen, at the appropriate moment. Afterwards Senators Reid and Salazar offered brief remarks to the press on the need to continue to work on improving relations.

THE OPPOSITION SPEAKS

¶11. (C) Senators and staffers met with two former Bolivian presidents, the leader of the opposition, several recent hunger-strikers, and other influential Bolivians at a dinner which offered them a wide spectrum of views of the Bolivian political context today. The Senators met with former president and current leader of the opposition Tuto Quiroga, former president Rodriguez, and ex-opposition hunger strikers Peter Maldonaldo and Juan Claudio Lechin. All of the opposition figures underscored their deep concern for the future of democracy in Bolivia and asked for continued U.S. support for the rule of law and democracy in Bolivia.

COMMENT

¶12. (U) Codel Reid's visit came with the right bipartisan message. Senator Reid's openness led President Morales to be frank with him about the President's (irrational) belief that the U.S. attempts to "destabilize" his government. The Senators also offered strong messages of an open hand of friendship and of support for democracy and anti-drug

policies. While we are not sanguine that the president will change his behavior as a result of this meeting (he announced a politically motivated change to Bolivia's visa policy covering U.S. citizens only 36 hours after the CODEL's departure), it certainly was an education for him) and yet another attempt by the United States to offer a friendly relationship with Bolivia. END COMMENT.

Senator Reid Staffer Richard Virma cleared this message.
GOLDBERG